

New Directions

Volume 17 | Issue 1

Article 3

1-1-1990

The Energy-Charged Life Of Dorothy Porter Wesley

Harriet Jackson Scarupa

Follow this and additional works at: <http://dh.howard.edu/newdirections>

Recommended Citation

Scarupa, Harriet Jackson (1990) "The Energy-Charged Life Of Dorothy Porter Wesley," *New Directions*: Vol. 17: Iss. 1, Article 3.
Available at: <http://dh.howard.edu/newdirections/vol17/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Howard @ Howard University. It has been accepted for inclusion in New Directions by an authorized administrator of Digital Howard @ Howard University. For more information, please contact lopez.matthews@howard.edu.

ON THE HILL

The Energy-Charged Life Of Dorothy Porter Wesley

6



1962 photo.



Discussing her research on the Remond family at a colloquium last fall at Harvard's W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for Afro-American Research. At right is the institute's director at the time, the late Nathan I. Huggins.

By Harriet Jackson Scarupa

"The thing about my life," says Dorothy Porter Wesley, "there's something going on all the time." Consider some of the activities of the diminutive 84-year-old librarian, bibliographer and scholar over the past year:

- In April, she was honored by Howard University's Moorland-Spingarn Research Center with the launching of an inaugural lecture series in her name. For 43 years (1930-'73), she had been curator of the collections that form the core of the center, transforming them into what is regarded as one of the world's most comprehensive repositories of information on the history and culture of people of African descent. Following a glowing tribute from Howard's Vice President for Academic Affairs Michael R. Winston, she dismissed most of the praise, as she did the microphone [which, at 4' 7", she couldn't reach anyway], to remark with her characteristically winsome smile: "On my 100th birthday, I want to be back to give a talk for the Dorothy Porter Wesley Lecture."

- In May, at Syracuse University, she confessed before a huge stadium crowd at a pre-commencement dinner that she had been a "bibliomaniac" all her life. During the commencement exercises, Syracuse awarded her an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters degree "for major contributions to the study of African-American history and culture."

- During the past academic year, she was a senior scholar at Harvard University's W. E. B. Du Bois Institute for Afro-American Research, where she worked on a book about Sarah Remond, a Black Abolitionist from Salem, Mass., who had journeyed to England in 1859 to spread the antislavery gospel, stayed there to attend college, then emigrated to Italy to study and practice medicine. Wesley shared some of her findings on the Re-

mond family at two of the institute's colloquia and critiqued others' research projects at similar sessions.

- In August, she journeyed to Italy with her daughter and son-in-law to tie up some last remaining bits of research on the extraordinary woman who had captured her imagination since the '30s. But then, again, Wesley says, "You never really finish your research."

- In September, she saw the fruition of her efforts to bring attention to another overlooked figure in African American history: 19th-century historian, Abolitionist and integrationist William Cooper Nell. At a ceremony in Boston, she unveiled a headstone placed on Nell's grave, then, at a special commemorative program at the city's African Meeting House, spoke of his work as a historian. "He had done so much, but still had so much more to do," she said, seeming to personally identify with his dilemma.

- In early October, in Washington, D.C., she spoke at a luncheon at the Library of Congress to pay tribute to still another important, though often unheralded, figure in African American intellectual history, Daniel A. P. Murray, the first Black librarian at the Library of Congress. In her talk, she stressed what has become one of the themes of her lifework: the importance of saving materials that can document the Black experience. Too many times, she lamented, people don't recognize the value of these materials and simply throw them out with the trash. As for herself, she quipped, "I always had my shopping bags with me."

- At the end of October, she was at the University of Utah in Salt Lake City to join leading scholars from around the world at a symposium on African American literature, history and culture marking the bicentennial of one of the first texts written in English by a former slave, "The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus

Vassa, the African, Written by Himself." (Several editions of the book are at Howard's Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, thanks to Wesley's efforts.) At the symposium, she picked up an honorary plaque—one of many she has received through the years—citing her "for pioneering achievements in African-American culture."

These are just some of the public activities that typically crowd her schedule. As for some of those away from the limelight:

There's that pressing book on Sarah Remond and her family, already interrupted by so many projects and obligations, that she just *must* finish.

There's a biography of Nell, written by her late second husband, historian Charles H. Wesley, which still needs footnotes and a bibliography, and a collection of Nell's letters a publisher is eager for her to edit.

There's Charles Wesley's own autobiography which still needs some finishing touches. [In addition to being a pioneering historian, he had been a minister and an educational administrator, serving as dean of Howard's College of Liberal Arts and Graduate School and as president of Wilberforce and Central State universities in Ohio.]

There're papers to organize, not only her own, but also those of Charles Wesley, and those of her first husband, the artist and art historian James Porter, and the decision to be made about where these papers should be deposited.

There're the reports she's been gathering for a possible book she'd like to write on how she built the Moorland-Spingarn Collection.

There're constant requests from scholars, students, filmmakers, journalists and others for interviews, research assistance and just plain advice.

What it all adds up to: there's so much to do, so much to do . . . and so little

time. "You know," she says, "you get old and you wonder how much more time you have and the phone's ringing all the time and the papers are piling up . . ."

It's not as if she's seriously complaining. Not really. Indeed, juggling multiple projects is nothing new for her. It all seems to be part of the Dorothy Porter Wesley way: living life to its fullest. It's a way that has inspired a bevy of admirers. To cite just three of them:

Says historian John Hope Franklin, who has known Wesley for more than 40 years: "Her interests and tastes are catholic and her enthusiasm and her energy are boundless and also contagious. No one can really be around her without being affected by them."

Randall Burkett, associate director of Harvard's Du Bois Institute, got to know Wesley only during the past year, but he, too, sings her praises. He calls her "a gem," "a real asset" and "a treasure, a national treasure;" speaks of her "charm," "wit" and "energy;" adding, "I feel we honored ourselves by honoring her by inviting her to be a senior scholar."

And Michael R. Winston, who served as director of the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center before he became a Howard vice president, concluded his tribute to Wesley at the inaugural Dorothy Porter Wesley Lecture with this hypothetical question: ". . . can any fail to appreciate how much we love this gallant, generous lady who merges grace and learning triumphantly?"

Getting the recipient of such near-adulation to pause long enough to talk about herself is no easy task. After all, as she says repeatedly, "I have too much to do, too much." But over a two-day period last fall, with the answering machine turned on to hold phone calls at bay, she finally acquiesced.

Sitting at the dining room table in her book- and art-filled house in Northwest Washington, she spoke of her life and work, how she's managed to juggle her multiple roles and the thread that seems to tie them all together. Her most frequent transitional phrase: "But that's another long story."

Building the Collection

In the role for which she is best known—developing what is today called the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center—there are stories galore.

As a Howard student in the late '20s, she had worked as an assistant in the old Carnegie Library [forerunner to Founders Library, where the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center is now housed]. Upon her graduation from the university in 1928 with a bachelor's degree in liberal arts and having spent several summers studying library science at Columbia University, she was offered a permanent position on the library staff. In the fall of 1930, the Board of

When the collection moved to the then-new Founders Library in 1939, Wesley insisted that its materials not circulate outside the Moorland Room.

Trustees appointed her librarian in charge of the "Negro Collection."

At the core of that collection was Howard trustee Jesse E. Moorland's extensive private library on the Negro [to use the terminology of the day], which he had donated to the university in 1914. Wesley's job was to organize the Moorland books as well as the library's other holdings related to the Black experience, among them the valuable Lewis Tappan anti-slavery collection; to catalogue these works; add to them; preserve and protect them; and make them available for study.

It sounds like a simple task. Not so. It was one that called not only for technical library skills [she received her master of science degree from Columbia in 1932], but also for dedication, persistence, ingenuity, the possessive zeal of a mother hen and a willingness to challenge the status quo. Take just the question of cataloguing.

The Dewey Decimal System, which librarians use to classify books, at the time had no valid way to accommodate books dealing with the Black experience. "Under the system, everything related to the Negro was classified under '325,' which was the number for 'colonization,' or '326,' which was the number for

'slavery,'" explains Wesley. Having the richness and variety of the Black experience reduced to these two categories outraged Wesley. It still does.

"The woman in charge of the Dewey Decimal classification at Howard couldn't see why I wanted to develop something else, why I didn't want to put a book of poetry by James Weldon Johnson under '325' or '326'—which was ridiculous!," she exclaims.

Wesley simply ignored her, as she typically ignored others who she thought weren't making much sense, and devised her own system. "I just began to base everything about Black literature and history wherever it fell in the regular Dewey Decimal classification—if it were a book on Blacks in the Revolutionary War, it would go under the same number as 'Revolutionary War', for instance. Then we just put a 'M' in front of it, for Moorland. It was very simple, you see, very simple."

It was but another skirmish in her long battle to build "her" collection, as she sometimes still refers to it.

Another skirmish: When the collection moved to the then-new Founders Library in 1939, Wesley insisted that its materials not circulate outside the Moorland Room. Her reasoning, again, was "simple." "You can't build a collection and let students and faculty take the books out," she points out. "Then you don't have them when somebody wants to come and use them."

Not everyone liked this policy. "I never could get along with Dean Snowden [Frank Snowden, the classics scholar who served as dean of the College of Liberal Arts between 1956 and '68]," she remarks, "because I just insisted he not take the books out and he didn't like that at all."

Still another skirmish: She believed that the collection shouldn't be confined to books and periodicals alone, but also should include letters, diaries, photographs, sheet music, records, newspaper clippings, artifacts and the like. Again, not everyone at Howard agreed. "There was a treasurer who didn't think I should buy music," she recalls. "So I had to do it secretly. I would buy something like Samuel Coleridge Taylor's 'Imaginary Ballet'—which was music—and list it along with books. He didn't have time to read that stuff anyway."

She wasn't being rebellious for the



At work in her special niche in the Moorland Room in the '40s.



In the stacks in the Moorland-Spingarn collection in the mid '50s.



With former governor William Scranton of Pennsylvania in 1971 when both received honorary doctorates from Susquehanna University in Pennsylvania.

sake of being rebellious, in her view. "All of this—our painters, musicians, athletes—is our background, what they've done all goes to make up our history. And that's all I was trying to do: to build a collection that would reflect all our history."

Piece by Piece

With no separate budget for the collection, an almost non-existent staff (initially consisting of Wesley and several student assistants), and having to cope with rampant sexism, as well, she systematically set about this task.

Some particulars: She engaged in a lively correspondence with booksellers, authors, private book collectors, their widows or widowers, publishers, historical societies, other libraries and leading Black individuals and organizations seeking out donations of material, often following up her letters with personal visits. She "went to bed with book catalogues every night," she says, to ferret out books she wanted to purchase for Howard. She started reviewing books, then donated the review copies to the collection. She solicited support for purchases from individual Howard trustees, often having paved the way by helping with research they needed done. She did the same with Howard's then-President Mordecai Wyatt Johnson. She, herself, became an expert on many aspects of African American and African history and culture, thus making it easier for her to identify vital research sources.

In sum, "She became a kind of historical detective," observes Debra Newman Ham, a specialist in Afro-American history and culture at the Library of Congress who is president of the Library's Daniel A. P. Murray Afro-American Culture Association. "She really learned how to sniff out or investigate leads in terms of finding out about documents and books and individuals and maintain a network of people who could help her get to materials that were historically valuable. She was a real pioneer in this effort and cared about many aspects of the historical development of Black archives and manuscript collections before other people were aware of their importance."

Under Wesley's stewardship, the collection grew spectacularly: from 6,499 items in 1933 to slightly more than 180,000 catalogued items in 1973, in addition to uncatalogued books, pamphlets,

Her biggest single coup was undoubtedly the acquisition in 1946 of the private library of Arthur B. Spingarn, a white attorney who had held top leadership positions in the NAACP [as vice president and president] for 54 years and was an avid book collector.

The Spingarn acquisition totalled some 5,000 items, including autographed books written by just about every living Black American author at the time, as well as books by Black authors else-

Not everyone she contacted in her relentless search for materials for "her" collection was helpful.

where in the world. Reflecting the importance of these additions, the name of the collection under Wesley's domain was changed to Moorland-Spingarn. [It became the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center in 1973, marking its designation as a specialized research library organizationally separate from the general Howard University libraries system.]

Not everyone she contacted in her relentless search for materials for "her" collection was helpful. "When I wrote Ethel Waters requesting a photograph, she wrote me a really terrible letter," Wesley recalls, with amusement. "She said, 'This is the second letter I've gotten from you. I've already sent you my photograph. Don't write me anymore.'"

"And a very important composer of Broadway musicals [Will Marion Cook] said he wasn't going to send anything to me because he had had a bad experience at Howard when he was there in the 1890s!" But, later, Cook relented, she says, and "I got many precious letters from him as well as autographed musical compositions."

"Shopping Bag Lady"

Then, too, like a fisherman who still talks about the big one that got away, Wesley

still laments the loss of some important research collections she had tried—and failed—to get for Howard. "Dr. [Mordecai] Johnson said he didn't have \$6,000 to give me for the John Brown collection," she says, by way of example. "Well, the University of Florida bought it." Her main competitors for material, though, were the Library of Congress and the New York Public Library's Schomburg Collection in Harlem.

Sometimes, however, she did manage to get what they overlooked. A case in point: District of Columbia civil rights and women's rights activist Mary Church Terrell had willed all her books and papers to the Library of Congress. When workers from the Library came for the material, they neglected to check out some closets in the basement. Wesley, invited to the house by Terrell's daughter, did. The result, says a still-gloating Wesley: "The few boxes of Mary Church Terrell papers that Howard has I got off the floor of her basement. They're what the Library of Congress missed."

Similarly, following the death of pioneer Black librarian Daniel A. P. Murray's eldest son, a real estate agent alerted Wesley that the Murray family home was to be sold and there were some papers scattered around that might interest her. Shopping bags in hand, Wesley hurried over, retrieving some valuable Murray documents from the dining room window sills and floor and even the fireplace in the living room. [The bulk of the Murray collection is at the Wisconsin State Historical Society.]

Through such antics, she became known as the "shopping bag lady." Recalls Charlotte Price, a Cape Cod, Mass., archivist who worked for Wesley in the early '70s: "She was in peoples' houses before the bodies were cold. She was a real go-getter—and still is."

At Howard, too, Wesley displayed the instincts of a scavenger. "She actually had me going through trash cans," Price recalls, with a mixture of affection and amusement. "At the end of the school year, the professors would be clearing their desks and throwing papers away and she thought—and she taught me to think—that some of those papers were of real historical interest. There were sometimes research papers students had written, for instance, or documents related to trends in the university."

Indeed, as far back as October, 1942,



Getting ready for a Martinican ball in Paris in 1935.

<http://dh.howard.edu/newdirections/vol17/iss1/3>

in an article in the *Journal of Negro Education*, Wesley had urged Black colleges and universities to set up some system to preserve their documents in order to be able to draw "a far truer picture of the development" of these institutions.

"Keeper" of the Moorland Room

Hand-in-hand with Wesley's efforts to build the collection were her efforts to make the material available. Toward those she considered serious and sincere, and that should be underlined, her helpfulness was legendary.

Says E. J. Josey, a former president of the American Library Association and founder and first chairman of its Black Caucus, who was a Howard student in the '40s: "In spite of how busy she might have appeared or how busy she was, she was never too busy to stop and assist students." "She inspired many young people, including myself, to pursue a career in librarianship," adds the University of Pittsburgh library science professor who dedicated his 1983 book, *Ethnic Collections in Libraries*, to Wesley.

With mature scholars, Wesley was equally, if not more, solicitous. John Hope Franklin, for instance, cites her help on the 40-year intellectual odyssey that became his critically acclaimed biography of pioneer African American historian George Washington Williams. "It seems that Williams was always in the back of her mind," he recalls. "It was she who found, for example, the first piece of writing that we have on him. It was his application to Howard University in 1869, a letter which he wrote to Oliver Otis Howard. The letter not only is the first that we have, but it's autobiographical, telling something about his childhood."

Commenting, in general, on the debt scholars owe to Wesley, historian Benjamin Quarles, in a June 1973 ceremony marking the dedication of the Dorothy Porter Room in Founders Library [which now houses the Howard University Museum], said this: "Without exaggeration, there hasn't been a major Black history book in the last 30 years in which the author hasn't acknowledged Mrs. Porter's help."

She apparently wasn't helpful to everyone. "I don't think she tolerated the casual, non-serious user very well," remarks Thomas Battle, the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center's current di-

11

rector, who worked under Wesley's direction when he first joined the staff of the collection as a reference librarian in December, 1971. Agrees Debra Newman Ham, like Battle, a Howard graduate, "You got the feeling that frivolous students couldn't see things, that you had to demonstrate the ability to get at the material."

12 Some, in fact, have accused Wesley of restricting access to the collection, a charge she denies. "I tried to keep things from being lost and protect materials, but I think it is the duty of a librarian or a collector to make things available to scholars and to students and, of course, to lay people who might be interested in records," she says. "I never, never kept anything away" from users of the collection, she insists.

But, on occasion, she wasn't above using non-direct means to achieve the same result. Example: "There was a white couple who wanted me to xerox a whole collection," she recalls. "They were using it for very sensational type things—I knew what they were doing because the woman showed me a book that she'd already published on one of our important historical senators—so I xeroxed a number of documents for her and told her I didn't have time or staff to do more."

"She wrote to President [James E.] Cheek to say she'd give him \$300 to give to me to let me xerox more things. I realized she was not going to use the material to best advantage, so I never answered the letter. So, you do try to protect your materials in some instances."

All in all, Wesley's reputation of being "fiercely protective" of the materials in the Moorland-Spingarn Collection, as more than one of her fellow librarians have described it, doesn't go away easily. Maybe, that's because of the lingering image many retain of her as "keeper" of the Moorland Room.

Wearing a big key around her neck, which she used to lock the doors of the room on more than one occasion to force an errant book thief to give up the goods, she'd sit at her desk monitoring everyone and everything within her view. From this base, she'd dart between the banks of card catalogues, the stacks, copying machine and reading room: assisting researchers, advising staff members, greeting visitors, even pausing from time to time to polish the

brass on the handsome glass-enclosed bookcases around the room when she thought they were looking a bit dingy.

In the tumultuous '60s, when an occasional student would express his disdain for middle-class propriety by putting his feet up on a table and not removing his hat, Moorland's diminutive curator thought nothing of going over and personally removing said feet or hat—or both. Being intimidated, apparently, was not her cup of tea.

Producing bibliographies came naturally to her.

"Bibliography is part of librarianship," she says.

Once, during the height of the Black Power movement, when a student sat down on the bench opposite her desk and told her, among other things, that students were "going to burn all this down, you know," she first got down to business. "I said, 'Well, I don't like the four letter words you're using,' she recalls, with zest. "I said, 'You're dirty, you're disheveled. I know your mother is ashamed of the way you look. You don't even smell right!'"

The next day, to her dismay, she found students had closed down the library. But she also learned that the same student she had so scolded had put a sturdy chain around the Moorland Room to prevent any of his more violence-prone brethren from damaging the collection. [At the time, some students were outraged, for instance, by the word "Negro" in the titles of many of the collection's books.]

Thomas Battle recalls another incident, this one in the spring of 1972, when a caller threatened to blow up the collection. The routine procedure when receiving a bomb threat was to evacuate the building, but Wesley would have none

of that. "My recollection," he says, "is that we had pretty much of a full house—it was near the end of the semester and students were trying to finish up papers—and she came out and announced that there had been this threat and that she wasn't closing and she wasn't going anywhere. And we didn't."

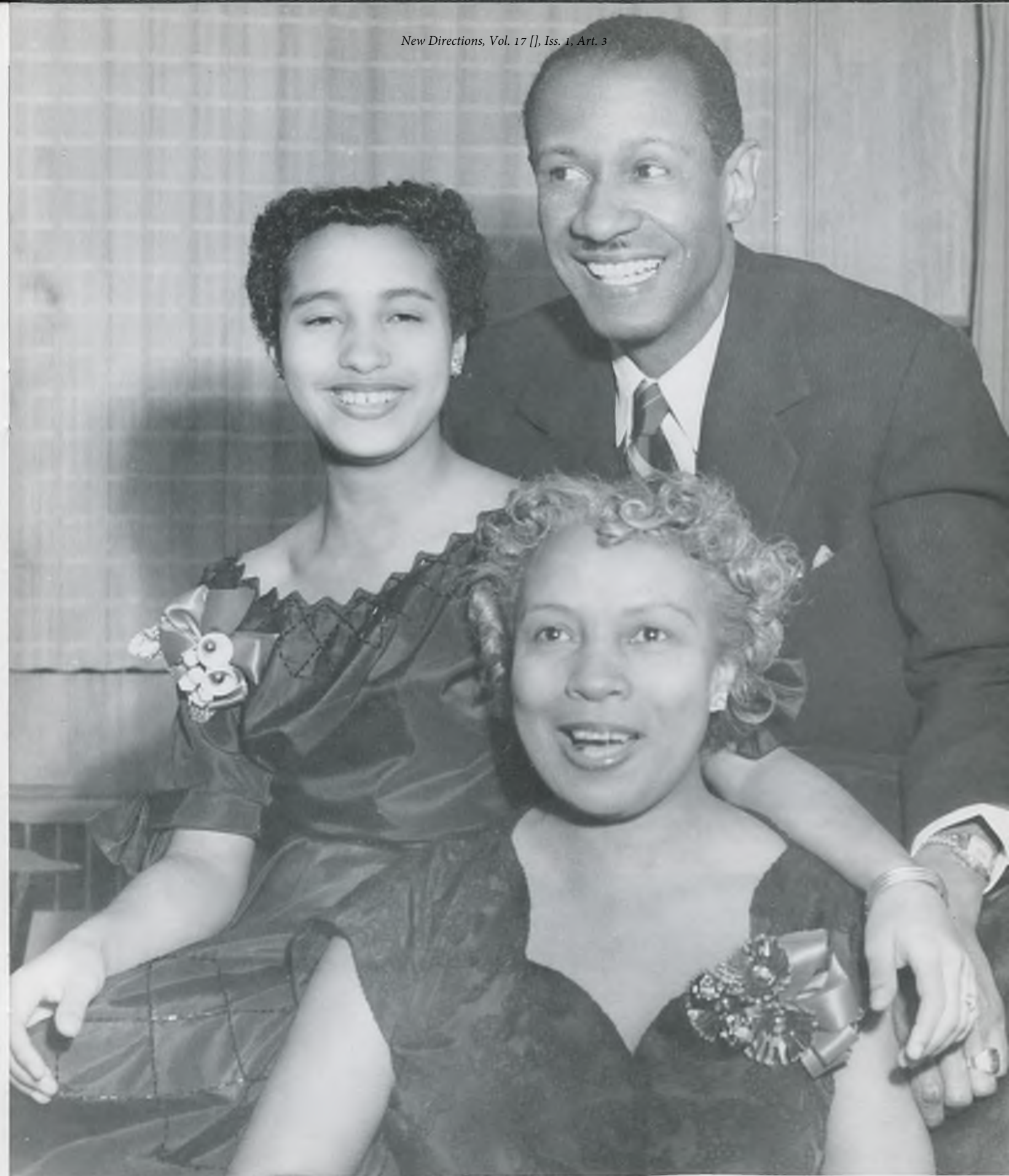
The Moorland Room contains a copy of her 1971 book, "Early Negro Writing." She's inscribed it: "For Moorland-Spingarn Collection, Howard University. My very first love." Perhaps, what it all boils down to is that what some see as her "fierce protectiveness" is but another marker of that love.

Bibliographer and Writer

Obviously related to Wesley's labor of love in building the collection and helping others draw on its richness has been her pioneering work in bibliography and scholarly research. Says John Hope Franklin: "She's a rare combination of a curator and a scholar, that is, a librarian who has done a *fantastic* amount of work in building a collection and at the same time has used that collection and other collections to do her own scholarship. She's written some excellent, wonderful pieces on various 19th century figures and she's done a lot of bibliographical work which has placed at our disposal all kinds of materials that we otherwise would not have had—both in this country and abroad."

Her bibliographies started out small. She'd make a list of books for a Negro History Week program on the poetry of Langston Hughes, for instance, or compile a list of books on Southern cooking for a women's club. In 1936, she produced a more ambitious publication for the U.S. Government Printing Office, "A Selected List of Books By and About the Negro."

From then on her bibliographic productivity continued at a steady pace. Among her works: "Catalogue of the African Collection at Howard University," published under the imprint of the old Howard University Press in 1958; "The Negro in American Cities: A Selected and Annotated Bibliography," which she prepared for the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders in 1967; "The Negro in the United States: A Selected Bibliography," published by the Library of Congress in 1970; "Afro-Braziliana: A Working Bibliography," published by



With her husband, James Porter, and daughter, Constance, celebrating the Porters' 25th wedding anniversary in December 1954.

14



Charming the audience last April at the inaugural Dorothy Porter Wesley Lecture sponsored by the Moorland-Spangarn Research Center,



With her daughter Constance Porter Uzeliac, greeting well-wishers at a reception following the inaugural Dorothy Porter Lecture.



At her 84th birthday party at the W. E. B. Du Bois Institute last May.

G.K. Hall in 1978. The latter, says Howard African diaspora scholar Joseph E. Harris, "is one of the richest mines of information on the subject that I know of."

That ground-breaking work, in a sense, represented a response to her own ignorance: she didn't know anything about Black Latin American writers and decided she should. So, she began by practically living in the stacks of the library in the Pan American Union building in Washington, D.C., [while on leave of absence from Howard] seeking out books and articles by and about Blacks from just about every country in the region. In time, she narrowed her focus to sources documenting the many and varied Black contributions to the history and culture of Cuba and Brazil, then narrowed it further, concentrating solely on Brazil.

When she began the project, a book was furthest from her mind. But when someone at G.K. Hall learned of the work she was doing, a book contract soon followed. "Some of the things I've done have come about that way," she observes.

Producing bibliographies came naturally to her. "Bibliography is part of librarianship," she says. "You see, you can't be a good librarian if you don't know the literature that you need to help scholars and students."

Her role as a writer had a similar motivation. "I found it was easier for me as a librarian to help writers if I did some writing myself," she says. "I think my first book review was way back in 1930." Her steady flow of book reviews was joined by scores of articles written for a variety of publications. She wrote of her beloved Moorland-Spangarn Collection, of course, but also on many other topics. Some sample titles: "The Organized Educational Activities of Negro Literary Societies, 1828-40;" "Negro Women in Our Wars;" "Books with Negro Characters for Children;" "The Negro in the Brazilian Abolition Movement;" "The Black Role During the Era of the Revolution;" "Family Records: A Major Resource for Documenting the Black Experience in New England."

Then, too, she edited the anthologies "Early Negro Writing, 1760-1837" (Beacon Press, 1971) and "Negro Protest Pamphlets" (Arno Press, 1969); contributed 11 profiles to "The Dictionary of American Negro Biography," edited by

Rayford W. Logan and Michael R. Winston (W. W. Norton, 1982); and helped both her late husbands with their own writing projects.

The one subject that seems to have captured her own scholarly imagination most is Sarah Remond. Researching and writing about her, she says, "was sort of like an assignment that was given to me from somewhere." She dates her interest in Remond to an old clipping she found in

Her father seems to have been the major influence in her early life. He may even be responsible for getting her hooked on research.

a scrapbook which said that Remond had finished studying medicine in Italy in 1871. "I thought, 'Who is this Black woman?' So, I decided I'd try to find out something about her," Wesley says.

What she began to find intrigued her even more. "First," she notes, "she was an Abolitionist and we didn't have many women who were going to England to give lectures urging the British to help us abolish slavery by not buying slave-grown American cotton." Wesley's quest to trace Remond's life took her to England, Scotland and Ireland, where the Abolitionist had lectured, as well as to Florence, Italy, where she had studied medicine.

Her aim in her search, as in so many things she's done, is linked to what she calls "this urge to strengthen the knowledge of our own heritage." "And we have a good heritage," she says. "There was no way for the African slaves to survive the Middle Passage if they hadn't been strong mentally, spiritually and physically. We did *survive*. And it's important to our young people now to know how we survived."

Roots . . . and Beyond

Wesley's "urge to strengthen the knowledge of our own heritage" didn't begin early. In fact, she admits, before she came to Howard, "I knew very little about the history and culture of Black people." She knew about Booker T. Washington and Paul Laurence Dunbar, all right, but not much beyond that.

After all, she had grown up in an Irish Catholic neighborhood in Montclair, N.J., one of four children of a physician who was a 1905 graduate of Howard's College of Medicine and a housewife who was active in church work and tennis circles. Most of her friends and schoolmates were white, as were the characters who inhabited the many books she read. And one of her favorite holidays was St. Patrick's Day.

In that community, she also was relatively sheltered from racism. Oh, there were a few incidents—like the high school French teacher who told her she could never speak French because her lips were too thick and that time when the six Black students out of a graduating class of 250 found out they would be at the tail end of the processional. She just ignored the French teacher's remark. As for the other, her father went up to school and insisted that all the students be assigned to their places in the processional in alphabetical order. (Tiny Dorothy Burnett, thus, was right up there near the front.)

Her father seems to have been the major influence in her early life. He may even be responsible for getting her hooked on research. "He always told me that I talked too much and that every time I talked I displayed my ignorance," she recalls, laughing. "So, he would make me explain and define all the words I used and when I didn't know or couldn't give a good explanation, he'd send me to a dictionary and then I would have to define the meaning. If I didn't know the meanings of any of the words in the definition, I'd have to look all those up."

After Wesley graduated from high school, she headed for Washington, prompted by a friend of her mother's persuasive argument that "You ought to send Dorothy to Washington so she can learn something about her own people." Thus, in the fall of 1923, she found herself enrolled in Miner Normal School [later to become Miner Teachers College, which was merged into the old Fed-



With members of her staff at the National Library in Lagos, Nigeria, while serving as a Ford Foundation consultant from 1962-64.

eral City College, now the University of the District of Columbia].

There her love of libraries blossomed under the tutelage of librarian Lula Allan. "It just seemed natural to be in libraries and to help people," she remarks. Summers she began taking classes at Columbia University's library school and, when she transferred to Howard in the fall of 1926, she became a student assistant in the Howard library.

Living in the nation's capital brought her face-to-face with a far less benign brand of racism than she had encountered in her hometown. The most galling of the many galling examples, in her mind: Blacks couldn't sit and read in the D.C. Public Library.

Later at Columbia, where she returned in 1930 to work on a master's degree in library service, racism raised its ugly head again. The instructor who was assigned to supervise her studies told her, "You come from an inferior background, an inferior race and you can't do the work," Wesley recalls. "I told her, 'Well,

I'm here to do it.'" It was a brave reply, but Wesley acknowledges, "I don't think I would have ever graduated if she [the instructor] hadn't broken her leg the first semester."

But back to Howard. During her compressed period as a Howard student, Wesley admits that her prime objective was "to get a degree and get through as soon as possible." But she has fond memories of such Howard legends as Alain Locke, Sterling Brown and Benjamin Brawley, who were not only her teachers but became her friends. At Howard, too, her quest to learn more about the Black heritage was born and thrived.

Another attraction of the university for her was a young art teacher named James Porter, whom she initially met on one of her summer sojourns to New York. Of necessity, their courtship was discrete. "At the time, it was a difficult situation for a professor to be interested in a student," she remarks. "There were a few cases that came up before the

board of a faculty member kissing a student and the faculty member was fired."

The Porters' 41-year marriage [from 1929 until his death in 1970] proved a rich partnership. Theirs was a life filled with art, books, music, travel and fellowship; with joint scholarly projects [She helped him with research materials on his important book, "Modern Negro Art"]; and with the responsibilities and joys of raising a daughter, Constance. [A former medical librarian, Constance Porter Uzelac now works with her husband remodeling homes in California.]

Throughout marriage and motherhood, Moorland-Spingarn beckoned. "I was in the library the day my daughter was born," Wesley says. And she returned to her job seven months after her daughter's birth.

One of the researchers she had often helped in the Moorland Room was Charles H. Wesley. In 1929, for instance, she indexed the first of his many books, "The History of Alpha Phi Alpha." Half a



With Charles H. Wesley (right), being greeted by then-Howard University President James E. Cheek at an Alpha Phi Alpha tribute to the historian on his 90th birthday.

century later, the two old friends and collaborators—one now a 74-year-old widow, the other an 88-year-old widower—began a new chapter in their lives with the exchange of marriage vows. It was a union of “the dean of Black historians and the dean of Black librarians,” as Philadelphia bibliophile Charles Blockson described it to a reporter from the *Philadelphia Tribune* at the time of Charles Wesley’s death in 1987.

Of the two multitalented men with whom she has shared her life, Wesley says, “I found them both persons who were very easy to live with, persons who were interested in what I was doing and I was interested in what they were doing. But it’s not easy [to make it all work]. All your time is spent—housekeeping and cooking and raising a child . . .”

Somehow, at one time or another, she also managed to fit in sewing most of her and her daughter’s clothes, making hats and jewelry, painting china, gardening, taking photographs for both husbands’ projects, accompanying them on the

piano when they sang, driving here and there. (Yes, she still drives, using a pillow to prop her up so she can comfortably reach the steering wheel of her large American sedan.)

All of this, of course, went alongside a thriving professional life that involved not only her more well-known work as builder of the Moorland-Spingarn Collection, bibliographer and scholar, but also such activities as serving as a consultant to the National Library of Lagos, Nigeria; running a National Endowment for the Humanities-funded workshop to acquaint college and university teachers and librarians with source materials in Black studies; serving as a member of the White House Library Group during the Carter administration; helping start the African Studies Association. And that’s just a small sampling.

That some consider Dorothy Porter Wesley a prototype of the liberated superwoman isn’t surprising. Her view: “You just do what you have to do.” As for how she managed to juggle everything,

she looks surprised, then answers: “But I loved and enjoyed what I was doing. I think that’s the main thing. You know, I’ve heard a lot of people who don’t like their work. All they’re doing is waiting for their check to come. But I always loved my work.”

When asked how she’d like to be remembered, after a quick intake of breath, she says, “Don’t ask me a question like that.” Then, more softly, more slowly, she answers, “I don’t need to be remembered. I think your work stands for itself—if you’ve done a little something.” □